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People power

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A good movie is never the work of just one person, but as **DAISY ZHONG** discovered at a HKDI screening, the team behind the film *Iron Sky* expanded their collaborative effort to include anybody with an Internet connection.

A SWASTIKA-SHAPED FORTRESS squatting among a rough and monochromatic landscape, nuclear missiles that break open the Moon's surface and a deafening, destructive orchestral soundtrack, they are all elements that suggest a camp Hollywood sci-fi blockbuster like *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* from 1991.

But these scenes are not from a futuristic tinsel-town movie with a US\$150 million budget, rather they are found in a Finnish-German-Australian sci-fi black comedy that was built upon seed investments as well as inputs from over 3,000 online contributors.

Iron Sky made its debut at the 2012 Berlin International Film Festival after 6 years in production and tells the improbable story of how Nazi Germans who fled to the Moon plan to return in triumph and conquer the Earth. It has been hailed as the forerunner of a new wave of film making that engages the audience in the process of making movies as well as watching them.

In November, three of the film's producers, Timo Vuorensola, Tero Kaukomaa and Jarmo Puskala brought *Iron Sky* to the VTC auditorium, along with their revolutionary ideas about filmmaking.

"The movie's roots were planted 20 years ago", says the director Timo Vuorensola. "A group of friends started shooting spoof episodes of *Star Trek* in a small

LEFT NAZI LUNAR LEADERSHIP AT THE HQ ON THE MOON, FROM *IRON SKY*; BELOW POSTER OF *IRON SKY*, STARRING GERMAN ACTRESS JULIA DIETZE WHO PLAYS THE MOON NAZI'S EARTH SPECIALIST RENATE RICHTER



RIGHT UDO KIER AS WOLFGANG KORTZFLEISCH, THE FÜHRER AND CHANCELLOR OF THE FOURTH REICH IN *IRON SKY*

kitchen." The team uploaded the episodes, titled *Star Wreck*, onto the Internet for free downloading, generating unexpected popularity and increasing requests that they should make a full-length feature film.

"In 1998 we started working on the feature but with only a little knowledge of how to actually make a full-length film." But thanks to the loyal fans of the *Star Wreck* episodes, the production team received substantial support from the online community with around 3,000 people donating money, script advice, casting, subtitles and 3D modeling.

Seven years later, the film *Star Wreck: In the Pirkinning*, was completed and released, and it proved to be an international success with several DVD versions issued. Following this positive result the team wanted to go further and get the *Iron Sky* project into production but what they had done with *Star Wreck* – communicating through email, forums, ICQ, MSN and IRC was no longer efficient for a major project like *Iron Sky*.

As a result, the Star Wreck team established *Wreck A Movie*, a collaborative filmmaking website to support and organise the community involvement for *Iron Sky*. The website served as a collaborative platform that allowed potential contributors to read the "tasks" assigned by the production team and chip in with their knowledge, ideas and creativity.

Jarmo Puskala, the Community Manager for *Iron Sky*, who is also the originator of the film's plot, has been responsible for keeping the community up to date. "We wanted to have the audience participate as much as possible all through the process, with the idea of that the film be the product of our community, our audience and our Internet fan base."

In the process the team has been in direct contact with over 200,000 fans online. Of these fans, 75,000 were found through YouTube, 50,000 on Facebook, and 55,000 were from the *Iron Sky* website. They took part in making *Iron Sky* by offering ideas ranging from suggesting names for characters through to 3D modelling of a starship.

"Our online community was responsible for bringing *Iron Sky* to life," says Vuorensola. The reason for that, according to him, is that the behaviour of film audiences has been heavily influenced by the



Internet, which enables the audience to have a more personal experience relationship with the films and movie genres they love. In this respect, "nothing could be more intimate than joining the creative process itself," he says.

A film project such as *Iron Sky*, which demands extensive Computer Generated Imagery, also requires funding on a completely different scale to the *Star Wreck* spoofs. In 2005 Kaukomaa, who has produced more than 20 feature films and founded the Finnish production company Blind Spot Pictures, joined the team to coordinate the fund-raising process.

Kaukomaa says finding financing for the film was the challenging. "All the way to the very end of the production, the film was on the verge of collapse. We were constantly struggling with a lack of resources, and it shouldn't have been possible to make the film at all. But luckily we launched this investment option for the online community which proved to be huge success."

Through *Wreck A Movie*, some 2,000 to 3,000 contributors who donated 1 Euro to a hundred Euros each were able to access a VIP area that allowed them to view the first five minutes of a film about how the movie was produced, or behind the scenes episodes. There were also 280 investors who contributed over 1,000 Euros each and they get dividends from the film's box office receipts.

This crowd-sourced funding added up to around 1 million Euros (HKD 10 million), or 13% of the total budget. "It was the most crucial first step," Kaukomaa says. "The community have become the 'lead investor' that is always key to the traditional film making process". An additional bonus was that traditional film investors, who were extremely cautious about investing in a project like *Iron Sky*, became more willing to put up their cash after they saw the impressive amount of money raised from fans through the Internet. With the online community at their back, the team sought co-financing for a trailer at the Cannes Film Festival in 2008, and as part of the publicity campaign, they released a digital comic prequel and a video game adaptation of the film. They finally succeeded in signing co-production agreements with two other production companies from Germany and Australia.

With the new cash flow the production process was fueled, bit-by-bit, over a 6-year process. The film starred girl-next-door Julia

Dietze and Aryan Ü bermensch-type Götz Otto, both from Germany, and the Slovenian industrial music group Laibach did the soundtrack, which is derived from the operatic style of Richard Wagner, a composer favoured by some Nazi leaders. Filming started in November 2010 and post-production was commenced in February 2011.

In November 2011 the team got confirmation that *Iron Sky* has been selected to premier in the Panorama Special section of the 62nd Berlin International Film Festival. "You could say that our dream came true. Is there a better place to launch this film than in Berlin?" says Kaukomaa. "We had been getting lots of comments on YouTube saying 'I bet this film is banned in Germany'. We still get that."

"It was scary having the premier in Berlin," says Vuorensola. "We didn't know what would happen – would the 1,800 audience jump up from their seats and tear us apart? Luckily they didn't – they stood up and gave us a ten-minute long ovation instead."

In the five months after its début the film has made \$8m at the global box office. Its fame has also popularised the *Iron Sky* fund-raising approach among filmmakers across the world. For instance, a team of young film producers in Taiwan released their film *Zombie 108* in April 2012 with money mainly raised from Facebook.

In Hong Kong *Iron Sky* was released on December 6, 2012. "This is a very unique choice for Hong Kong viewers," says Ray Fong, who represents the film's Hong Kong distributor VII Pillars Entertainment Ltd, "because the story of the production process is itself inspirational, encouraging new ideas for entertainment as well as different perspectives to

about the world of film making."

Fong showed the film at the VTC Auditorium on November 14, 2012 with free admission, in the hope that people could enjoy the film and a dialogue with the three film producers. The screening attracted an audience of 600, about half of which were VTC students, and it was followed by a conversation with Vuorensola, Kaukomaa and Puskala.

"During the interaction with the producers, we learned that the Internet can make anything come true, and that a great production is within our grasp if we have the right motivation, enthusiasm and confidence," says Cheung Fan, a lecture in the HKDI's CDM department, who helped to organise the screening. "There is no doubt that I will encourage my students to learn from the example of *Iron Sky*."

Cheung also stressed that the story of *Iron Sky*'s creation has important implications for educators. "No matter how well-prepared and informative our lectures are, they can never teach students the reality of the production process," she says. "So in the future, we will try to provide more opportunities for students to exchange ideas with international professionals."

Vuorensola, who is a big fan of classic Hong Kong movies, like *Better Tomorrow* (1986), says *Iron Sky* can serve as a way to motivate students. "They should be told 'Don't wait around' because there is nobody who will be just waiting for the chance to fund your first film," says the producer. "It's so much easier to talk about great films than to make a bad one. The first thing you need to do is to go out there, gather a group of friends, get a camera in your pocket, and start shooting." ⑩

BELOW THE PANEL DISCUSSION AFTER THE *IRON SKY* SCREENING WITH RYAN LAU, BERNADETTE WONG, CHEUK FEI (UFO SPECIALIST), TERO KAUKOMAA (CO-PRODUCER), TIMO VUORENSOLA (DIRECTOR), JARMO PUSKALA (WRITER), BEDE CHENG (HONG KONG INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL PROGRAM MANAGER)

